



The Grammaticalization and the Polysemy of the Discourse Marker Well (<Summaries of the Papers Read at the Twenty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Tsukuba English Linguistic Society>)

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journal or publication title	Tsukuba English Studies
volume	23
page range	131-132
year	2004-09-21
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2241/7503

The Grammaticalization and the Polysemy of the Discourse Marker *Well*

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Well, which is used as a Discourse Marker, is notorious for its various uses. In this paper, we focus especially on the diachronic aspect of *well* as a face-threat mitigator, which, according to Owen (1981, 1983), signals and mitigates some sort of confrontation such as disagreement, refusal, or rejection. We consequently claim that *well* has developed its PDE usage through the process of grammaticalization.

Around the year nine hundred, *wel*, the earlier form of *well*, approximately means “clearly, definitely, without any doubt or uncertainty (cf. *OED2* s.v. *well* adv., sense 14.a).” This leads to the use of *well* in Middle English which signals that the speaker fully accepts the interlocutor’s utterance as in (1):

- (1) ‘Aske what ye woll and ye shall have hit and hit lye in my power to gyff hit.’ ‘*Well*,’ seyde thys lady, ‘than I aske the hede of thys knyght...’
(Malory 1470 [Jucker, 1997: 99])

In the Early Modern English (henceforth ModE), however, there is a growing tendency of *well* to be used for signaling the speaker’s partial, not full, acceptance toward the interlocutor. (2) illustrates this use:

- (2) Tom: Yes, you must keep a Maid, but it is not fit she should know of her Masters privacies. I say you must do these things your self.
Ione: *Well* if it must be so, it must.

(Samuel Pepys’ Penny Merriments 1684 [Jucker 1997: 102])

Although *Ione* in (2) cannot fully agree with Tom’s idea, she is willing to accept what Tom said. This partial acceptance is regarded as a face-threatening act, since it implicates the speaker’s disagreement with the interlocutor. *Well* here signals and mitigates the face-threatening act committed by *Ione*. Thus, *well* in Early ModE already has the force of a face-threat mitigator in the modern sense. The question now arises: why does *well* show such an expansion of usage; from full acceptance to partial acceptance? It is reasonable to suppose, as Jucker (1997) suggests, that just because a speaker accepts the hearer’s position does not necessarily mean that he should give full acceptance to it. Speaker signals by using *well* that he is considering whether he should accept the situation or not. In other words, there underlies a meaning such as “I WANT TO ACCEPT what you said, but...”

In Late ModE downward, *well* underwent a further change. Different from Early ModE, *well* in Late ModE decreased the function of acceptance and came to be used to express objection: “I want to accept what you said, BUT...” The relevant example is the following:

(3) *Truly*, says he, *because I have lost all my estate, and can't pay, nay I have nothing to live on. Well, but*, returns the merchant, *wasn't you a knave to borrow money, and now can't pay it?*

(The Life of Robinson Crusoe, 1720: 40)

In (3), the speaker expresses objection to the interlocutor, which is marked by “*well, but.*” This clearly shows that the speaker is not accepting the interlocutor’s preceding utterance.

Well as a face-threat mitigator is often used in Present Day English (henceforth PDE). What is worth noting is that in PDE there are some cases where *well* just signals the face-threatening act and does not show the speaker’s wish to keep a good relationship with the interlocutor. This is often seen in a conversation between close friends where there is less need to mitigate the face-threat. Let us examine (4), extracted from a drama “Ally McBeal”:

(4) Ally: Maybe you should leave.

Billy: Me?

Ally: I like this firm.

Billy: So do I. I came all the way from Michigan...

Ally: *Well* if you hadn’t gone to Michigan in the first place...

In (4), *Ally* interrupts *Billy*, her ex-boyfriend, and begins to blame him. There is no pose before and after *well*, which shows that she has no hesitation to commit a face-threatening act. *Well* may still mitigate the face-threat but it is not intended by the speaker.

The same is also seen in a conversation between relative strangers if the speaker need not be polite to the interlocutor. Let us examine (5):

(5) Rabbi: ... We don’t do that. We don’t just “modify” our faith to make it more popular.

Ally: You don’t need to be condescending.

Rabbi: *Well*, forgive me, I’m not used to people bouncing in here, asking me to “adjust” Judaism. (Ally “The Attitude”)

In (5), *Ally* first insults the stubborn *Rabbi*, which is a face-threatening act against him. The *Rabbi* apologizes but he does not at all seem nor sound at all sorry, in spite of the use of *well*. The *Rabbi* sarcastically utters *well* to show that he has no intention of being friendly to *Ally*.

We can conclude from this argument, therefore, that the function of acceptance which *well* first performed has been replaced by the one of signaling the upcoming objection in the face-threat mitigator use. Any unfriendly use of the term *well*, which is peculiar to PDE, would need further research.